

Atheist Recommends God

By Rusty Wright &
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The headline in *The Times of London* grabs your attention: 'As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God'.

The tagline is even more pointed: 'Missionaries, not aid money, are the solution to Africa's biggest problem, the crushing passivity of the people's mindset'.

What kind of atheist is this? Matthew Parris, *Times* writer, award-winning author, and former Member of Parliament, is not your typical atheist.

Atheists and Agnostics Unite!

Recent projects promoting atheism or agnosticism

include best-selling books: Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*, and Christopher Hitchens's *God Is Not Great*. Bill Maher's film *Religulous* calls 'anti-religionists' to unite against religion's dangers and 'enshrine...rationality'.

In Illinois and Washington state capitols, the 'Freedom from Religion Foundation' countered government-sanctioned Christmas nativity displays with signs declaring religion false, heart-hardening, and mind-enslaving.

It is unusual for an atheist to write favourably about faith. What led Parris to his surprising conclusion?

Reluctant Observation

Parris grew up in Africa, and returned recently to cover a non-governmental development organisation for *The Times*.

The NGO, Pump Aid, helps provide clean water to rural communities.

The organisation is secular, but several of its 'most impressive' African representatives are devoted followers of Jesus. Their character evoked memories for Parris:

Travelling in Malawi refreshed [a] belief...

I've been trying to banish all my life, but an observation

I've been unable to avoid since my African childhood.

It confounds my

ideological beliefs, stubbornly refuses to fit my worldview, and has embarrassed my growing belief that there is no God.

Now a confirmed atheist, I've become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of secular NGOs, government projects, and international aid efforts. These alone will not do. Education and training alone will not do. In Africa Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good'.¹

Interestingly, Parris's carefully considered conclusion, based on empirical observations across Africa, resonates with biblical statements: Jesus told a first-century leader: 'You must be born again...of the Spirit'.² Paul, an early skeptic-turned believer, affirmed: 'Anyone who belongs to Christ has become

a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!³

How It Liberates

Parris emphasises Christianity's impact on the individual, beyond the good works it spawns. Living in Africa, he observed 'the Christians were always different'. Their faith seemed to have 'liberated and relaxed them'. They exhibited a liveliness, curiosity, engagement, and directness that seemed absent in traditional African life. The Christian Pump Aid workers he met stood out for their honesty, diligence, and optimism.

Parris bemoans tribalism for fostering an attitude of fear and 'exaggerated respect for a swaggering leader'. He credits Christianity's emphasis on a direct, personal relationship with God for encouraging an individuality that can help 'cast off a crushing tribal groupthink. That is why and how it liberates'.

Whoa! Christianity engenders individuality and frees the mind? Is this the same Christianity that some criticise for breeding a herd mentality among undiscerning followers—something like 'a crushing groupthink'?

Actually, it isn't. Parris specifies Christianity based on a personal relationship with God. He observes that such Christianity 'smashes... through' the traditional collective mindset. No surprise. Jesus overturned Temple tables and blasted religious leaders for supplanting God's ways with their own. Criticisms of Christianity/religion as mind-enslaving and heart-hardening likely characterise devotees—and there are many—tainted by misguided thinking or

misplaced devotion, not led by the biblical God.

Though atheists and Christians might debate the mechanism, atheist Parris finds the fact undeniable: when God is personal, Christianity changes African hearts, lives, and communities for the better.

Notes

¹ Parris's article can be accessed through www.timesonline.co.uk.

² John 3:7–8

³ 2 Corinthians 5:17

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